

Don't let accommodations detract from basics

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London Free Press April 21, 2012

In 2009 a mandate from the Ministry of Education was given to Ontario Public School Boards to comply with changes covering a variety of religious and cultural practices within Ontario's public schools. School boards were given time to implement gradual changes providing appropriate religious accommodations and many Ontario school boards are presently engaged in complying with the Ministry of Education's directions as best they can.

The Thames Valley District School Board, like other Ontario school boards, has already made considerable efforts to follow this mandate. The task is not a simple one, and in the end it may be impossible to please all students and parents who present their differing religious requests to Boards.

Following is a list of instructions to which the Thames Valley District School Board and other school boards have already made accommodations for a variety of religious customs:

1. Permission for students to be absent for holy days or faith-based observances.
2. Exemption from school opening and closing ceremonies for religious reasons.
3. Providing private room/space for students to pray with supervision.
4. Provision for religious dress, including head covers, crucifixes, Stars of David, and kirpans.
5. Modesty requirements for dress during physical education.
6. Smudging practices common among aboriginal cultures (burning tobacco or sacred medicines such as sweet grass, sage, etc.)
7. Dietary restrictions/fasting.
8. Required participation in curricula and classroom instruction that may conflict with some beliefs, but is essential for the completion of secondary school education.

The above list requires careful planning. Considerable thought has already been devoted to making school classes open to a wide variety of religious and cultural persuasions. Ontario school boards should be commended for their careful work in these areas. Nonetheless, I have reservations when I think about religious accommodations for students.

It is likely that, as more and more accommodations are made for religious reasons,

the number of requests will increase at an accelerated pace. Given the great variety of religions, it is possible that participating school boards may be overwhelmed by requests. Physical space, timetable space, and teaching resources are necessarily limited. There are inevitably limitations to what even the most accommodating Boards can achieve, even though they may have the best of intentions.

Within the broad scope of religions such as Christianity, there are many different opinions concerning subjects such as diets, dress codes, religious holidays, celebrations, acceptable reading materials, and science courses on evolution, etc. The list expands as religious persuasions increase to include Islam, Sikhism, Judaism and many other broad religious groups.

Where accommodations are to be made by teachers and administrators, let them direct their efforts to teaching the fundamentals of education in literacy, numeracy, and in understanding skills needed to live productive lives after formal education is over and students make their way in the everyday business of living. In the work-a-day world, people need to cooperate side-by-side with fellow workers of different religions and cultures. As adults, we are generally expected to work without having special concessions for our own individual religious choices.

Making religious concessions in public schools will require sensitivity and patience and effort. I have the feeling that the politicians of Ontario through the Ministry of Education have handed over a task to the public schools without sufficient direction and knowledge as to how such a gargantuan task can be accomplished. The government's mandate has left this difficult task to be handled by each school board as best it can.

Nothing I have said should be taken to mean that I am critical of school boards, who do their best to comply with the mandate that has been handed to them. Nor do I think it unimportant that teachers respect the religious preferences of those students who choose religion, and those who choose no religion at all.

The public school system draws together students from a variety of cultures and religions, or no religion. These represent a microcosm of Canadian society within which students will live as adults. Accommodating students' different and unique religious preferences in public schools may actually be a hindrance later in their adult lives as they face the expectations of our Canadian mosaic at the end of their formal education.